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ABSTRACT

Before empirically based theories of loneliness can be formulated, it may be necessary to probe people's feelings, explanations, and reactions in a relatively unstructured way. Toward this end, three multiple response items relating to these issues were included in an 84-item questionnaire, published in the Spring of 1978 in several northeastern newspapers. Each of the three questions, dealing with feelings, reasons, and responses, was followed by a list of answer alternatives derived from open-ended questions in a pilot study. Approximately 24,000 respondents filled out the questionnaire. Factor analyses performed on each of the three questions, separately for each sample, revealed highly stable factor structures. Of the three factor analyses, feelings, reasons, and reactions to loneliness, the one for feelings produced the most highly intercorrelated oblique factors. (Author)

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The Experience of Loneliness:

A Factor Analytic Exploration *

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Although descriptive and theoretical accounts of loneliness often attempt to portray the feelings of lonely people, their reasons for loneliness, and their typical responses to it, few statistical explorations of these issues have been attempted. Perhaps because loneliness is a highly personal and subjective experience (not a behavior), it has been neglected by research psychologists until fairly recently. Before beginning our empirical study of loneliness, we listened to people's accounts of their experience. We combed through novels and poems, and interviewed lonely people (see Rubenstein & Shaver, in press). From these accounts, we were able to construct simple but systematic measures for collecting subjective reports from large numbers of people. Today we will report the results of two large closed-ended questionnaire studies which systematically explored people's experience of loneliness.

In an 84-item loneliness questionnaire designed for publication in several American newspapers we included three multiple-response items concerning feelings of loneliness, reasons for loneliness, and reactions to loneliness. Each item consisted of a question (e.g., "How do you usually feel when you are lonely? Circle all that apply") and a randomly ordered list of answer alternatives (e.g., down on myself, sad, unable to concentrate, bored) derived from interviews and open-ended surveys.

Our two largest returns were from the New York Daily News (N=22,000) and the Worcester (Massachusetts) Telegram (N = 1,500); these will be the basis of the analyses presented here. (For purposes of analysis, a random subset of 2,000 responses from the New York sample was used; all 1,500 responses from Worcester were included.)

Feelings Associated with Loneliness

When people label themselves "lonely" the feelings they most often mention having are: sadness (60%, 56%), depression (-, 60%)[1], boredom (55%, 46%), self-pity (50%, 49%), and longing to be with one special person (56%, 45%).

A principal components factor analysis, with varimax rotation[2], was performed on the 27 feelings associated with loneliness. Table 1 shows the four factors

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[1] Due to a typographical error in the Daily News, the word "depression" was omitted from the answer alternatives for this question. Since the results were so similar for New York and Worcester, we placed "depression" on the factor where it loaded in the Worcester analysis (see Table 1).

[2] An oblique rotation was also examined for this and all other factor analyses discussed here. Although the order of the factors varied slightly, the clusters themselves did not change. Where appropriate, intercorrelations among factors derived by oblique rotation will be mentioned.

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that emerged and the factor weights for each item. We have called these factors Desperation, Depression, Impatient Boredom, and Self-Deprecation.

The first factor, Desperation, accounts for the largest share of the common variance (76.5%) and reminds us of theoretical discussions of loneliness that emphasize broken relationships. Weiss (1973), for instance, distinguishes emotional from social isolation, likening the former to the "distress of a small child who fears that he has been abandoned by his parents" (p. 20). This, according to Weiss, is the form of loneliness experienced by separated, divorced, and widowed marital partners -- adults whose most intimate ties have been severed. The Desperation factor also brings to mind Bowlby's (1973) contention that despair is a child's response to parental separation, and adults who experienced severe separation anxiety as children continue to be subject to this feeling. Adults who are uncertain about the availability of an intimate attachment are likely to respond with fear to any potentially fearful situation. Thus, the feelings described in the Desperation factor -- panic, helplessness, fear, vulnerability -- may represent an extension of childhood separation anxiety. Our third factor, Impatient Boredom, is similar to Weiss' (1973) concept of "social isolation." Social isolation evokes bored and restless feelings similar to those, says Weiss, of a "small child whose friends are all away." In adulthood, these feelings can arise when traveling alone and after moving to a new job, neighborhood, or city.

The two remaining factors, Depression and Self-Deprecation, are probably best conceptualized as <u>reactions</u> to loneliness. Although measures taken at a single point in time cannot establish a temporal relationship, it seems reasonable, given what is known about depression, to suggest that prolonged loneliness or repeated rejection leads to self-blame and finally to depression. When oblique rotation was allowed in this factor analysis, Depression and Self-Deprecation were the most highly correlated factors (r = .56). Desperation and Impatient Boredom, conceptualized here as two types of loneliness, were not highly correlated with each other (r = .22).

In order to conduct additional statistical analyses using the four "feeling factors," items loading on a particular factor were unit-weighted and summed to form an index. For example, a person who checked four of the seven items on the Desperation factor received a Desperation score of 4. These factor indices were correlated with other variables assessed by our questionnaire.

In line with Weiss' (1973) theorizing, Desperation scores were highest for adult respondents who were currently separated or divorced. Also corroborating Weiss, Impatient Boredom correlated significantly with dissatisfaction with number of friends and quality of friendships. Of all four feeling indices, Impatient Boredom had the largest negative correlation with age, suggesting that boredom as a component of loneliness is more characteristic of the young than the old. (Our respondents ranged in age from 18 to 87.)

Self-Reported Reasons for Loneliness

Our questionnaire said: "Listed below are some reasons that various people have given for feeling lonely. If you have been lonely during the past year or so, circle all the major reasons." Twenty reasons were provided. People were most likely to attribute loneliness to having nothing to do [being bored] (49%, 31%), being alone (49%, 36%), and having no spouse or lover (36%, 27%). A factor analysis of the 20 reasons yielded five replicable factors, shown in Table 2.

Once again, two of the factors correspond well to Weiss' (1973) distinction between emotional and social isolation. Being Unattached, accounting for 44.4% of the common variance, is similar to emotional isolation. Alienation, accounting for 22.3% of the common variance, is comparable to social isolation.

Indices based on these factors were constructed and correlated with other

variables. If emotional isolation is parallel to Being Unattached and is associated with feeling Desperation, then these two unit-weighted indices should be significantly related, and they are. Similarly, if social isolation is comparable to what we call Alienation and is associated with Impatient Boredom, these two indices should be related, and they are. As we would expect, a large proportion of the variance in Being Unattached (30%) is accounted for by marital status.

The remaining third of the common variance in reasons for being lonely is due to three additional factors. Factor 3, Being Alone, describes simple situations in which the absence of other people (or another person) is noticed. The fourth factor, Forced Isolation, is an important reason for loneliness among the infirm and handicapped. Dislocation identifies mobility and being in a new social setting as reasons for being lonely. (We know from other analyses that this form of loneliness is transitory; its effects usually disappear within a year; see also Fischer and Phillips, 1979,)

Forced Isolation is a reason for loneliness among the elderly (over 60), who are significantly more likely than people in any other age group to say they are housebound, hospitalized, or without transportation. This does not mean that a disproportionate number of old people are lonely, however, since only a small minority are isolated in these ways.

Living situation accounts for 10% of the variance in Being Alone. For those who live alone, Being Alone is an important cause of loneliness (significantly more so than for any of those in our eight other living situation categories). However, as we discuss in another paper in this symposium ("Living alone, loneliness, and health"), the effect of living alone is powerfully mediated by how a person characteristically responds to being alone.

Reactions to Loneliness

We asked: "When you feel lonely, what do you usually do about it?" The most common reactions are to read (50%, 52%), watch television (60%, 49%), listen to music (57%, 48%), or call a friend (55%, 45%). A factor analysis performed on the 24 responses to loneliness yielded four distinct factors (see Table 3).

Sad Passivity accounting for 46.6% of the common variance, is a characteristic reaction to loneliness among those who are severely lonely. It is a state of self-pity which may well contribute to a vicious cycle of low self-esteem and social isolation. It is highly correlated with the feeling factors Depression (r = .49) and Self-Deprecation (r = .46). Those among you with psychoanalytic training may notice the similarity between this factor and the concept of "oral passivity"; overeating, taking tranquilizers, drinking, or getting "stoned," and passively taking in television images are all "oral" in the psychoanalytic sense. The items on this factor, taken together, say: "I am helpless and dejected; love me, take care of me."

The remaining three factors represent solutions to loneliness chosen by people who are infrequently lonely. Active Solitude, accounting for 24.2% of the common variance, portrays a creative and rewarding use of alone time; it is an alternative to loneliness. The profligates, who react by Spending Money, compensate themselves for negative feelings -- or at least attempt to distract themselves. Not surprisingly, people with annual incomes over $30,000 circled significantly more of these items than did respondents with incomes below $5,000.

Social Contact, accounting for 12% of the common variance, deals with the problem of loneliness head-on, by "calling a friend" or "visiting someone." For people who use this strategy, loneliness is likely to be a transient state. Following oblique rotation of the factor structure, the highest inter-factor correlation was obtained for Social Contact and Active Solitude (r = .33). Thus

people who are able to use solitude creatively are also likely to take action when faced with loneliness.

Theoretical Implications

Of the three factor analyses (feelings, reasons, and reactions to loneliness), the one for feelings produced the most highly intercorrelated oblique factors ($.22 < \underline{r} < .56$). It seems that feelings of loneliness are neither as separable nor as easily defined as reasons or reactions to loneliness. The problem is probably both temporal and conceptual, since feelings are apt to change over time, blend into one other, and be difficult to label precisely. Perhaps lonely people do not even attempt to label distinct feelings; the word "loneliness" may be sufficient. On the other hand, it is natural for people to wonder why they are lonely and what can be done about it.

We created the lists of feelings, reasons, and reactions to loneliness on the basis of interviews and an analysis of literary accounts of loneliness, not by consulting existing theories. Nevertheless, our results offer substantial support for Weiss' (1973) theoretical distinction between emotional and social isolation. Of the four feeling factors, two -- Desperation and Impatient Boredom -- are conceptually similar to emotional and social isolation. Of the five reason factors, Being Unattached and Alienation together account for two-thirds of the common variance. And Being Unattached -- i.e., being without a spouse or lover -- is the phenomenon Weiss was studying when he conceptualized emotional isolation. Alienation -- feeling different, not being needed, having no close friends -- is very similar to the condition of the recent resettlers whom Weiss was studying when he coined the term social isolation. The prominence of these dimensions in our data is strong evidence of their validity and a sign that separate scales could be constructed to measure emotional and social isolation.

Peplau's attribution model (Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979) helps to make sense of the connections between loneliness, Depression, and Sad Passivity; and between loneliness and the other reaction factors we identified -- Active Solitude, Spending Money, and Social Contact. Peplau and her colleagues have shown that lonely people can explain their negative feelings in a variety of ways. The dimensions underlying the possible explanations of loneliness appear to be internality, stability, and controllability (Michela, Peplau, & Weeks, 1978). A person who chooses (or is forced to accept) internal, stable, uncontrollable attributions or explanations (e.g., "I am inherently unloveable") is likely to give up trying to form satisfying relationships and is a good candidate for Depression and Sad Passivity. A person who believes that the causes for loneliness are internal and controllable is likely to exert effort toward personal change; a person who blames external conditions may lash out in anger or attempt to alter his or her unpleasant circumstances.

Our factor analysis of reasons, one might think, should have produced evidence for Peplau's three attribution dimensions; after all, reasons and attributions are highly similar concepts. However, our list of reasons did not contain all of the kinds of attributions discussed by Peplau, Russell, and Heim (1979). Our list was based on an open-ended questionnaire study of college students, completed before we learned of Peplau's work; and our subjects provided mainly situational reasons for their own loneliness. They did not refer to qualities of themselves, such as unlovability, shyness, or poor social skills, which might have allowed an internality factor to emerge. It is interesting that Peplau and her colleagues got their factor structure by asking subjects to explain <u>not</u> themselves, but a hypothetical lonely person (in a story constructed especially for the study). The relationship between our two procedures remains to be explored, but subjects would probably attribute negative qualities to themselves more readily if they were invited to do so in a close-ended questionnaire than if they were asked an open-ended question like ours: "For what reasons have you felt the most severe loneliness?"

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Table 1

Factor Analysis: Feelings When Lonely

Factor 1 "Desperation"		Factor 2 "Depression"		Factor 3 "Impatient Boredom"		Factor 4 "Self-Deprecation"	
	factor loading		factor loading		factor loading		factor loading
Desperate	(.556)	Sad	(.517)	Impatient	(.526)	Unattractive	(.506)
Panicked	(.518)	Depressed	(.514)	Bored	(.418)	Down on self	(.490)
Helpless	(.463)	Empty	(.463)	Desire to be elsewhere	(.401)	Stupid	(.452)
Afraid	(.436)	Isolated	(.455)	Uneasy	(.392)	Ashamed	(.338)
Without hope	(.403)	Sorry for self	(.426)	Angry	(.379)	Insecure	(.323)
Abandoned	(.393)	Melancholy	(.416)	Unable to concentrate	(.322)		
Vulnerable	(.312)	Alienated	(.295)				
		Longing to be with one special person	(.252)				

Table 2

Factor Analysis: Reasons For Being Lonely

Factor 1 "Being Unattached"		Factor 2 "Alienation"		Factor 3 "Being Alone"		Factor 4 "Forced Isolation"		Factor 5 "Dislocation"	
	factor loading		factor loading		factor loading		factor loading		factor loading
Having no spouse	(.752)	Feeling different	(.618)	Coming home to an empty house	(.559)	Being house-bound	(.565)	Being far from home	(.270)
Having no sexual partner	(.702)	Being misunderstood	(.495)	Being alone	(.498)	Being hospitalized	(.467)	In new job or school	(.234)
Breaking up with spouse or lover	(.236)	Not being needed	(.454)			Having no transportation	(.267)	Moving too often	(.232)
		Having no close friends	(.395)					Travelling often	(.207)

Table 3

Factor Analysis: What People Do When They Feel Lonely

Factor 1 "Sad Passivity"		Factor 2 "Active Solitude"		Factor 3 "Spending Money"		Factor 4 "Social Contact"	
	factor loading		factor loading		factor loading		factor loading
Cry	(.488)	Study or work	(.411)	Spend money	(.618)	Call a friend	(.596)
Sleep	(.473)	Write	(.394)	Go shopping	(.597)	Visit someone	(.512)
Sit and think	(.418)	Listen to music	(.375)				
Do nothing	(.407)	Exercise	(.347)				
Overeat	(.324)	Walk	(.306)				
Take tranquilizers	(.292)	Work on a hobby	(.296)				
Watch television	(.250)	Go to a movie	(.289)				
Drink or get "stoned"	(.238)	Read	(.279)				
		Play music	(.246)				